



Poof! An Illinois Township Vanishes

Description

There is scant evidence that Evanston Township ever existed.

The township office has been shuttered. The website was deactivated. The stationery has been chopped into scratch paper. And the township's metal street sign is gathering dust in the basement of the Evanston Civic Center.

If you don't see the video above, [click here and watch it on WTTW](#).

Bonnie Wilson, the township's former assessor, wants the sign, her personal files, and other remnants to be donated to the Evanston History Center for preservation.

It's appalling to me that it's all just gone," Wilson said. "We need to preserve these things so people know the history of Evanston Township."

Evanston Township became history, literally, on May 1, when it was dissolved as a unit of government and its duties were assumed by the City of Evanston.

Voters in Evanston decided in March to consolidate the 157-year-old township into the city government to save taxpayer money.

It marked only the fourth time in Illinois history, and the first time since 1932, that voters decided to dissolve a township.

But Evanston taxpayers might not have been given the chance to vote were it not for the efforts of the Evanston City Council and a local state lawmaker, who teamed to battle the powerful political influence of township officials both locally and across the state.

It was an arduous process that required two voter referendums, passage of narrowly focused legislation in Springfield, and the blessing of both local lawmakers and the powerful leaders of the General Assembly.

The effort is viewed as a major stride toward [smart streamlining](#), referring to a movement backed by the BGA to reduce Illinois' estimated 7,000 units of government—the most in the country—while making it more efficient and responsive to residents.

“It was a miracle that Evanston was able to get out from under township government,” said David K. Hamilton, a professor of public administration at Texas Tech University, who authored several studies on [Illinois township government](#).

Whether Illinois can expect more “miracles” remains to be seen.

Inspired by events in Evanston, some residents in River Forest would like to place a similar advisory referendum on the ballot, asking voters if they want to dissolve River Forest Township into the village government.

And they’re paying attention in Lake County’s Avon Township, where dissolution has long been a heated topic.

Also keeping a close watch are the Township Officials of Cook County and the Township Officials of Illinois, two powerful lobbying groups in Springfield.

“We feel strongly that township government plays a vital role. Township government is a people’s government; it’s able to best respond to the needs of the people,” said Bryan Smith, executive director of the Township Officials of Illinois.

The movement to preserve township government is formidable.

Consider how the River Forest Township advisory referendum will be left off the Nov. 4 ballot because pro-township forces found enough questionable signatures on petitions to leave anti-township activists short of the required number.

“There are some people in River Forest who will fight to preserve township government. We have to do a better job next time to get more signatures,” said Thomas Cargie, a River Forest village trustee and one of the leaders in the drive to place the referendum before voters. He plans to try again for the April 2015 election.

Yet neither opponents nor supporters of township government expect sweeping reform. If there is further consolidation, it likely will be a piecemeal process that will whittle away at the 1,430 units of township government in place across Illinois, Hamilton said.

“I don’t see any big movement here,” he said. “It’s going to happen one at a time.”

Politics and voter apathy play key roles, Hamilton said.

“In Illinois, there is a large political apparatus based on township government. Townships are a bastion for patronage jobs. Politicians don’t want anyone to mess with their power base,” he said.

At the same time, most taxpayers don’t notice, or don’t care, Hamilton said.

It's most difficult to get voters motivated because townships represent such a small portion of the tax bill. A lot of people don't feel the bite of township taxation," he said.

But Evanston is one of those communities where people did notice and did care, and the city's grind them out method of dismantling Evanston Township could become the model for other dissolution efforts.

Should River Forest's advisory referendum ever pass, Ill. Rep. Emanuel Chris Welch (D-Westchester) plans to introduce a narrowly tailored bill to the General Assembly seeking to dissolve River Forest Township. Should that bill pass, voters would be presented with a binding referendum.

"Evanston carved out a path for others to use on a case-by-case basis," Welch said.

That voters were even given the chance to decide on disbanding Evanston Township is the result of some unique circumstances.

The City of Evanston may have outlived Evanston Township, but the township came first.

John Evans, one of the founders of Northwestern University, founded the Town of Evanston in 1857. The City of Evanston was incorporated in 1863, and the boundaries of the city and township are coterminous, that is, exactly the same. Evanston Township was one of 20 coterminous townships in Illinois, and one of five in Cook County, the others being Berwyn, Cicero, Oak Park and River Forest townships.

Besides sharing boundaries, the city and the township shared governance: Evanston was one of only a handful of coterminous townships where the township board members were the same elected officials serving on the city council.

The duplication didn't end there. Illinois law states that townships serve three basic functions: administer general assistance to the needy; assess property for taxation; and maintain roads and bridges outside federal, state or local jurisdiction.

Over time, Evanston Township lost control over two of its three main functions. In 1932, the General Assembly gave direct control of all property assessment to the Cook County Assessor. And as Evanston developed into an urbanized community of 75,000 residents, the city's public works department gained control of all road and bridge repair.

That left general assistance, and Evanston Township served about 100 needy clients with emergency aid for shelter, food and health care, while also providing job training.

All told, Evanston Township had the equivalent of 7.5 employees: an elected part-time supervisor with four full-time and one part-time employee, and an elected part-time assessor with two full-time employees.

Evanston Township's \$1.5 million annual budget represented a mere 0.12 percent of the average taxpayer's bill, compared with the City of Evanston's \$255 million budget, which is almost 19 percent of the tax bill.

Yet, for years, Evanston city leaders felt that the township had outlived its usefulness, with much of its budget going to salaries and administrative overhead. The Evanston City Council believed that it could assume the services of the township while reducing costs.

“We thought we could provide the same or better services while saving the taxpayers money,” said Evanston Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl.

Consider that of the roughly \$1.3 million in the township’s annual general assistance fund, \$554,000, or 40 percent of the money, was going toward payroll and administrative costs, according to township budget records.

Then there was the nearly \$167,000 in annual expenses of the township assessor’s office, which didn’t assess property values, but rather assisted residents in filing property tax exemptions and appeals to Cook County.

Additionally, there was a cash surplus of more than \$1.5 million, equal to the township’s total annual budget.

“We thought there would be better use of the money by bringing the township operations into city hall,” Tisdahl said.

So Evanston voters were asked in a March 2012 advisory referendum whether the township should be absorbed into the city. Nearly 67 percent supported the measure.

“The referendum was critical,” Tisdahl said. “We weren’t going to make a move unless the citizens clearly supported it.”

The next move was crafting legislation to make it happen.

Under Illinois law, voters in an entire county can decide to simultaneously dissolve all townships within the county. But voters in a single township can’t choose to dissolve on their own.

Enter Ill. Sen. Daniel Biss (D-Evanston), who in March 2013 filed a bill proposing that a single township in Illinois be allowed to dissolve by a referendum of its voters. The bill went nowhere.

“The Township Officials of Illinois have a strong network in Springfield and made it impossible to pass,” Biss said.

Biss amended the bill twice, eventually narrowing it to the following: the township had to be located in a county with at least 3 million residents and have at least seven square miles of land. That description applied to only Evanston Township.

It passed unanimously in the Senate. The bill was assigned the Senate Executive Committee, which Biss said indicated it had the support of Senate President John Cullerton.

In the Illinois House, the bill was sponsored by Rep. Robyn Gabel (D-Evanston), Rep. Laura Fine (D-Glenview) and Rep. Kelly Cassidy (D-Chicago), each of who represent portions of Evanston. With House Speaker Michael Madigan offering no objections, the bill passed 70-44.

“I think we were able to pass it because it applied to only one township and all the local legislators supported it,” Biss said.

With the new law in hand; the City of Evanston was able to place a binding referendum on the March 2014 ballot asking voters once again if they favored dissolving Evanston Township. Almost 64 percent voted for dissolution, and the city moved quickly to close down the township on May 1.

What remains unanswered is whether the City of Evanston can make good on its pledge to offer to lower costs and offer better services.

There is some early evidence of cost savings. A 2013 study commissioned by the city identified some \$161,000 in annual savings, and that estimate appears to be on target.

When the township moved out of its offices and into the Evanston Civic Center, it resulted in an annual savings of \$72,000 for rent, utilities, supplies and other expenses. Another \$30,000 savings came from reduced computer and IT costs.

The township staff was reduced from an equivalent of 7.5 employees to 4, and folded into the city’s operation. Three workers continue to administer general assistance, while another serves as a taxpayer advocate. The annual payroll savings translates to about \$59,000.

Additionally, the city is drawing down on the township’s cash surplus to fund the general assistance budget. The city has drawn \$750,000 from the surplus, and still has \$813,000 in reserves.

The most important question, according to the Township Officials of Cook County, is whether people are being sufficiently served.

“Are the constituents in need of general assistance being served, or have they thrown them off the bus? Are the constituents needing help with their taxes being told to go to Cook County?” said Robert Porter, the association’s administrative coordinator.

While he can provide no firm numbers, City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz said the city has increased the number of general assistance clients it serves.

“We’re finding more people who need general assistance,” he said. “The money that would have gone to computers and phones is going to people who need services,” Bobkiewicz said. He said the taxpayer advocate is available to assist citizens with assessment appeals, exemptions and other issues.

“There is the sense on the part of township officials that there is some sort of secret sauce associated with the operations of a township,” Bobkiewicz said. “The reality is, it’s all been pretty seamless. The world didn’t come to an end.”

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